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INLAND FAR

*A BOOK
OF THOUGHTS
AND
IMPRESSIONS*

BY

CLIFFORD BAX



LONDON
WILLIAM HEINEMANN LTD

1925

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When I had risen to go, I paused for a moment to look closely at four or five little pictures, visionary in subject and like enamel in the brilliance of their colour. "I did them", said Yeats, "when I was at the art-school in Dublin." Then taking me to the top of the stairs, he observed, "You are a young man. May I give you a word of advice?" "Of course," I answered. "Always write", he said, "about what you know."

Under the stars of a summer night I walked through the London streets, confused and elated, until I had come to a corner from which the bus would begin its long slow journey to Hampstead. I felt like a man who has been upon a mountain. Perhaps I had touched the mood in which an Athenian youngster existed within an hour or two of his initiation at Eleusis. But "write about what you know," he had said: and in that sense I had known nothing. I wanted to write about nymphs in a forest, magicians who brewed philtres in lonely towers, or moon-worshippers riding ecstatically by the fringe of the sea. What did I "know"? How could I make a poem out of cricket, out of the Slade? It might be that I was attempting too much. It might be that I should have to abandon painting in order to achieve any excellence in verse. Had not Rhys hinted as much? "I want to hear", he had written, "about your paintings and your poems. Which will win? Perhaps neither." Not perceiving the ambiguity of these words, I had assumed him to mean that I looked like failing in both arts: and I began to wonder how best I might equip myself as an author. "The man who reads only one language", I reflected, "must always

remain a parochial writer. Suppose I leave Heatherley's, and persuade my parents to send me to France and Germany? They may refuse, but at least I can put my project before them. Why is there no literary Tonks, who should save the young aspirant from splitting his infinitives or using two adverbs in a sentence? A writer can get no outward help except by acquiring modern languages."

During the winter my parents arranged that in the following May I should go to Munich, and enter the art-school there, and learn as much German as I could. Before this, however, I went with two cousins for a few weeks to Switzerland. In my bag I packed a *History of the Rosicrucians*, a volume of Tolstoy's *Essays*, and the manuscript of a half-written epic. Five years earlier I had begun by writing fluently. I was now inhibited by a passion for the minutest finish, and I would spend a whole day in adjusting three lines.

We stayed in a vast and fashionable hotel, the headquarters of Winter Sport. Each day I tumbled about on skis, but I was always glad when the sunset had faded from the dazzling mountains, and I could return to the lounge, and discover what Tolstoy had really preached. One evening, an hour before dinner, I read "The First Step", an essay in which he describes the abominations of a slaughter-house. I resisted him so long as I could. He might be exaggerating. New methods might be more humane. And of what use were it for me to become a vegetarian? The others in that hotel would continue to smack their lips over beef and mutton; and the manager

would not order a pound the less. On the other hand, if nobody protests, the world will never reform. "Do it now," said the voice of Tolstoy. "Own the truth. Act, and fear nothing." Dish after dish did I waive. My elder cousin asked me if I were ill. "To eat dead bodies", I told him, "is barbarous and disgusting." I had half expected him to fling down his knife and fork, and, like myself, to eat only a few lettuce leaves and an ice. He felt, on the contrary, that my behaviour discredited our party; and for a day or two he vouchsafed me no word. Perhaps he feared for my sanity: at least he feared for my health. Telegrams flew between Switzerland and Hampstead. He told me not to be a fool. He warned me that suicide was unfair to a man's parents. I was obstinate. I remained loyal to salad; removing, with more solicitude than ever, those of my fellow-creatures who had died in its recesses.

In early years we read quickly. I soon burned my way, like a meteor, through the pages of Tolstoy, and now I was nearing the end of *The Rosicrucians*. The gong for dinner boomed through the empty lounge. I laid my book open, on a wicker table, and took up a newspaper. There was revolution at St. Petersburg. Artillery, I read, had massacred the mob: some one had assassinated a Grand Duke. At dinner, the whole room talked of this news. It was barely credible. The age of violence had passed: revolutions were so theatrical: but then, of course, Russia was only half civilised. Imagine these waiters, imagine these blond intelligent German boys, marching to Potsdam and dying on barricades!

When I returned to *The Rosicrucians* I stared at the book in astonishment. Drawn firmly in pencil, a magical symbol confronted me—there on the page. I could not believe that a dead Rosicrucian had precipitated the sign. I could not believe that in such an hotel there was any one who had studied magic. In this I was wrong. A powerful man, with black magnetic eyes, walked up to me. He wore a velvet coat with ermine lapels, a coloured waistcoat, silk knee-breeches, and black silk stockings. He smoked a colossal meerschaum. "My name", he said, "is Aleister Crowley. I am a poet and magician. How much do you know of the Great Science? Have you mastered Cornelius Agrippa? Perhaps, if you are engaged upon geomantic experiments, you will be interested to read this book." He handed me a sumptuous volume, written by himself.

Discretion, unfortunately, must blur my portrait of this queer personage. Rumour feeds on his name. Is it not said of him that he is a Black Magician; that he wanders from continent to continent, founding bizarre sects; that for two years, at a distance of three thousand miles, he haunted a debtor in South Africa; that the Fascisti drove him from Sicily; that, during the War, he stood beneath the Statue of Liberty, proclaimed himself King of Ireland, and proceeded to declare war upon Great Britain? And when the Sicilian actors came to London, and flung each other about the stage, and bellowed, and foamed at the mouth, did not Crowley display a placard outside the theatre, bidding the public to "read the poems of Aleister Crowley: he writes as the Sicilians act"? And did he not offer a prize for the best treatise upon his

religious doctrine? And was not the work that obtained the prize entitled "The Star in the West"? Frantically attempting to secure the admiration of men, he has gained, in spite of his various talents, only their obloquy or contempt: and yet, though I never became his follower, I suspect, even now, that there were few persons in that hotel who were half so able as he. Every evening we played chess together, and to play chess with a man is to realise the voltage of his intellect. A strong and imaginative mind directed the pieces that opposed me. Moreover, he was an expert skater, an expert mountaineer; and in conversation he exhibited a wide knowledge of literature, of occultism, and of Oriental peoples. I am certain, too, that with a part of his personality he did believe in his Messianic mission. On the eve of my return to England, after we had played the last of our chess-games, he exhorted me to devote myself to the study and practice of magic. I understood that he would instruct me. "Most good of you," I stammered, "but really, you know,—perhaps I am not quite ready. I must read a little more, first." "Reading", he answered, "is for infants. Men must experiment. Seize what the gods have offered. Reject me, and you will become indistinguishable from all these idiots around us." He paused, and then asked abruptly, "What is the date?" "January the 25th," I answered. "What is the year,—according to the Christian calendar?" "Nineteen hundred and five." "Exactly," said Crowley,— "and a thousand years from this moment, the world will be sitting in the sunset of Crowleyanity."

IV

IF any one speaks of "platonic love", the eyes of a wiseacre twinkle knowingly: and yet, though it may not be common, it does exist. Crude writers affirm that a man of the South is realistic about sex, that a man of the North is sentimental. The Latin, they tell us, admits frankly that women are "engines of delight". He knows that his passion has a physical origin and that it aims at a physical pleasure. The Northerner, we are told, conceals the truth from his mind and gulls himself that his longing is largely spiritual.

These writers neglect the evidence of the *Vita Nuova* and the *Divina Commedia*. Moreover, they think that, by using the word "sentimental", they have disposed of the Northern ideal: counting upon the glee with which most men welcome the defamation of anything that is fine. Idealism is not sentimentality; and the truth may be, as an East End doctor observed, that "Latin people isolate sex, but we Northerners relate it to everything else in life. I can't help thinking", he added, "that our view is the more mature."

During "the terrible years between twenty-five and forty", platonic love is perhaps both unattainable and not

courage in the act of renouncing ourselves, and men will continue for ages and ages to deny the necessity of that act, but it is the turning-point in the history of every man. It is a plunge. For a time we seem to be left in an empty darkness. But when we have 'lost' ourselves, we 'find' something that has no name, something that is mightier than any separate self."

By this time the visitors were arriving. The first-comers knocked on the door. As I welcomed them in, the Bhikkhu took a seat and spread out his manuscript. Patterson lighted the candles. Within a few minutes the small company was assembled, and the Bhikkhu began the first of his discourses, charging every word, as I felt, with the whole force and beauty of his personality. Remembering that wet night of winter, I still hear the faint accompaniment of those incongruous fireworks and still see the Bhikkhu turning his last page as he uttered the words, "For we are taught that every saint who passes to the Farther Shore brings all life yet a little nearer to peace: until at last, as *The Sutra of the Diamond-Cutter* puts it, the time shall come when, in the day wherein the hearts of all living beings shall have become attuned to the heart of the Buddha, 'there shall not remain one particle that now is dust but shall have entered into Buddhahood'".

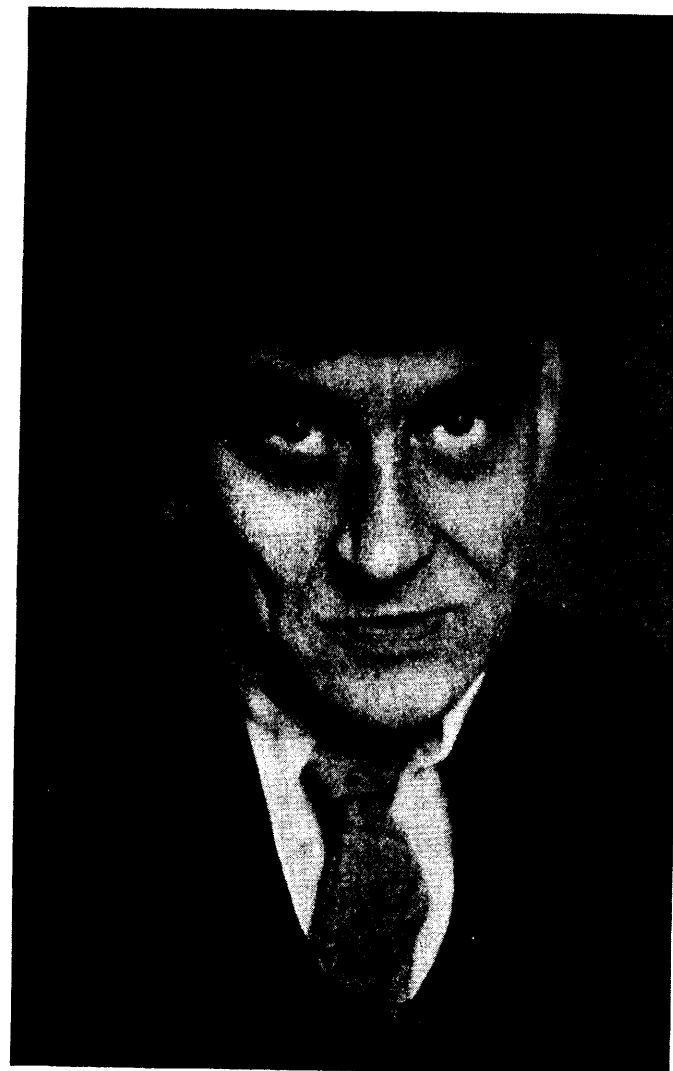
XXI

THREE years, like many hundred feet of a motion-film, had unwound their delightful or troublous incidents. In 1920 I had spent the earlier months in Sicily; and, ever since, I have felt that I know how fresh the world and how buoyant life seemed to the men of Homeric Greece. In August a number of my veteran cricketers, together with some raw recruits, had convened in Berkshire, and had succeeded, somewhat to my surprise, in re-establishing the traditions of the Manor House. In the autumn I had joined a house-party in Versailles, invited by a witty and beautiful Franco-American of whose surname I was ignorant until I arrived: and there, in the course of days that were alternately amusing or idyllic, we had heard from a young French officer fantastic stories of the campaign in Syria. Our hostess combined the grace of a Frenchwoman with the enterprise of an American, and no one who had visited her in Versailles could have withstood a suggestion that he should rejoin the party when it assembled, in the spring of 1921, on the Riviera. And what Londoner does not remember with a sigh the magnificent summer of that year: when, month after month, day after day, went over us golden and unspoiled; when we put

away our umbrellas and forgot where we had put them; when, for once in our lives, we could walk out of the house at any hour with no precaution against cold or rain? Cries of alarm from the country came to us through the newspapers, but we gave the countryman only lip-sympathy and, rather than see that summer broken, would gladly have let the race of cauliflowers become extinct. And now another summer had come and gone, the bedraggled summer of 1922, that dwindled imperceptibly into a mournful autumn and a winter of deluge.

For some time the Gunns had lost interest in Buddhism. They felt that by associating themselves with Freudian psycho-analysis they had left the unstable element of mystical thought and had set their feet on the *terra firma* of fact. They began to smile at my metaphysical ascents, and to say, not unkindly, that the Bhikkhu had done all his thinking twenty years earlier. He, aware of their attitude, expressed astonishment that his old friends could make such a philosophical exchange. "Psycho-analysis", he said, "is a brilliant searchlight directed upon a few aspects of the mind. I am sorry that Batt and Meena should feel that it can displace an all-enfolding religion." The Gunns had now vanished to Vienna: and, oddly enough, the redoubtable Baynes was, at that time, preparing himself, in Zürich, to become the British champion of Dr. Jung's discoveries.

I felt, when the Gunns were gone, that the Bhikkhu had lost two stimulating friends, and it was therefore the more delightful to find that he had filled his days with a new interest. Some one had enabled him to rent a second



From a photograph by Alvin Langdon Coburn.

ALAN BENNETT.

room in the Battersea villa, and there, surrounded by strange machines and aided by a young analytical chemist, he busied himself with the invention of a gramophone that should be able to play records of unlimited length. For more than a year—throughout 1922—he worked at this project with the zest of early youth. And sometimes, too, he would adumbrate a plan, even more ambitious, of devising an instrument that should record thoughts. For he held that thought, when operating through the brain, has an effect upon physical space, and his dream was of registering thoughts upon the instrument and of then projecting them onto other minds. “It would revolutionise education,” he observed: and although I remained sceptical about the possibility of the device, I remembered warily how wiseacres had once derided both wireless and photography. During the latter part of the year I saw little of the Bhikkhu, for much of my time was spent with Frederick Austin, Nigel Playfair, and Pitt Chatham. When the new year entered, we had produced our play, and I began to reproach myself for neglecting a sick friend. The weeks, however, streamed past and I might never again have seen him if he had not sent me, one day in February, a copy of his long-delayed book, *The Wisdom of the Aryas*. On the following day I went over to Battersea. For a little time we talked about friends and ideas. Then I asked him for the latest news of the gramophone.

“We have given it up,” replied Bennett.

“Really? Why? Won’t it work?”

“I’m convinced that it would,” he answered, “but when Gray—the friend who’s helping me—went to take

out a provisional patent, he found that a similar instrument had been patented twenty years before. It was never put on the market: but of course the patent remains effective."

"What bad luck—after all these months of work!"

"I was disappointed," said Bennett gently, "and all the more because Gray has given a lot of time to it. But I should be a poor priest of my religion—shouldn't I?—if I could not accept the rebuff."

"Well, anyway," I observed, "your book has appeared at last. That's something."

"If people will only like it", he responded, "I would try to prepare a deeper book. But whole days go by when I can do nothing, so wretched a physical inheritance did my parents give me. Ah, women, women—if they would but think of the consequences when they summon, so wantonly, a new creature into this world!"

"Surely", I protested, "you ought not to lay all the blame upon women."

"No, no. Of course you are right," he answered. "Nevertheless, I often think that Nature must have regretted her invention of the male. It is most often men who resolve to reverse her gigantic engines." And when I was leaving he accompanied me to the front door of the villa, despite the cold air of March, and said, "I know you are busy now, but come again soon. As soon as you can." I promised to do so, and shook hands with him, saying confidently, "Till we meet!"

As I walked to the bus junction, Battersea depressed me more than usual. Our civilisation looked lamentably

partial. Yes, we have ships more powerful than any that the past can show, and guns more tremendous, and probably better sanitation, and certainly a surer medical knowledge, and perhaps a more widely diffused control of passion: but look at these dwelling-boxes; look at these shops; and consider, undeterred by any mock-fear of pharisaism, what elements in life are those which most interest the majority of men and women. It is not as though only Battersea were ignoble. Think of Blackpool and Glasgow, and the slums of provincial towns in France, and the city of Denver, and those unlovely cities in Australia. Battersea, though, is sordid enough to make us doubtful at times whether men will ever again devise a reasonably pleasant and honourable life. Look at these rows and rows of mean and bilious-coloured houses: at these vile small shops crammed with rubbish for sale, at these big shops with their accumulation of tasteless "goods", their total lack of architecture, and their monstrous letters that bawl the name of the shopkeeper and that vulgarise the very air that we breathe. I knew that the people around me could see nothing base in the city with which they had been familiar from childhood. I knew that they had pleasures which kept them glad enough to be living. It seemed incredible, though, that men should claim nothing better; and I marvelled anew at the knowledge that generation after generation would be born and would die, accepting, as though it were necessary, a sordid standard of pleasure and never conceiving that life might be, and often has been, an experience of much finer quality. Who could take a Martian visitor to

Battersea or Denver and declare, without shame, "This is what we have done, and this is how we live?" I thought of the ancient Greeks: and of their dismay if they could see how men manage life in the twentieth century. In any museum we may see how they managed it in their time. I do not believe that they ever took thought to live beautifully. They had not conceived that beauty might be unnecessary. Was it not, though, from some perception of this kind that so many of my contemporaries had appealed to socialism as the one cure? Yes, but their Utopia stopped short at material change. Less work and more money might be desirable; and yet the people in this country who enjoy both benefits were little more presentable, as examples of the human race, than the prosperous tradesman or the ill-nourished newspaper-boy: for the pleasures of each class are, as a rule, almost exclusively material. And I thought of the bored gentlefolk who drift about country-houses, and of the general level of conversation in a West End club, and of Judges who ask "What is the use of music?" and of Matthew Arnold's ineffectual effort to diffuse an ideal of culture.

Perhaps it was the dismal effect of simultaneously imagining what might be and seeing what is, that made me fail to keep my promise to the Bhikkhu. For another month went by, and I had not seen him again. And then, on an early day of March, I was summoned to Battersea by a voice that was not his. I had come back from a discussion in Pitt Chatham's dressing-room about the transference of our play from the Kingsway Theatre to the Savoy. I had meant to get back to the studio by nine and to do some

work; but Frederick Austin had been present and had beguiled me, as usual, with his varied and vitalising conversation, so that I did not see the glow of my stove until half-past ten. It was too late then for work, and accordingly I took down a book of poems. Before I had read a page the telephone shrilled across the studio. From the other end of the wire Mrs. Green, the Bhikkhu's landlady, announced herself. She wished me to go to Battersea at once. The Bhikkhu was dead. He had died, not painfully though after prolonged pain, at five o'clock that afternoon. I promised to go the next morning, early. Very strange did it seem that my friend could have gone from this world without my having been aware of it. At five that afternoon, what had I been doing? I had been writing, there at the table. And during one of those minutes in which perhaps I had struggled with some difficulty of my craft, the man who had been least world-soiled of all whom I had known was encountering at last the most momentous of all experiences, the event which he had awaited with lifelong curiosity and, for many years, with a patient desire of release. Alan Bennett had "changed his world". Perhaps he was already remote from the level of my thoughts: and perhaps he was nearer than he had ever been before.

When, the next day, I had left the bus and was walking toward the obscure road in which he had lived, I felt "He is not there now, he is far away: and I am but taking part in a shadowy proceeding." And with astonishment I realised that, except when chance had shown me the execution of that Chinese pirate, I had never seen a human

being in death. "That, at least," I thought, "is a tribute to modern civilisation." Would they want me to look at the empty form of my friend? I supposed that I could avoid the ordeal: for like most people I had an instinct to shun the dead. Surely that was a foolish instinct: perhaps a vestigial superstition? Or did it show that we are predominantly mental creatures, and for that reason recoil from organic matter that is no longer informed with mind? Certainly I could sympathise with any one who shirks contact with an imbecile or even a drunkard. And for the last time I pushed back the gate of that lowly villa.

Mrs. Green, with a long face, opened the door. She led me through a passage to her obfuscated parlour. A lesser Mrs. Green was sitting in a wicker-chair before the oven. They began to praise Bennett. He was never a one to give trouble. He had always been "that" kind, poor Mr. Bennett had. And only last Tuesday he laughed so, it did you good to hear him. A silly chap, not quite straight in his mind, had been blowing a penny whistle in front of the house, and making the most dreadful noises: and Mr. Bennett had sent Mrs. Green to give the man twopence and to ask him to play somewhere else: and the man had said, "Then the gentleman doesn't like music!" How Mr. Bennett had laughed. "Music," he'd kept on saying, "doesn't like music!" And now, poor gentleman—there he is upstairs. But they thought it was only right to themselves that I should know of a bill outstanding with the laundry. Two shillings and fourpence. I could see it for myself. They had no need to keep anything dark. And then there had been expenses in connection with "laying

'im out nice". And that Mr. P——, he was for taking every scrap of what poor Mr. Bennett had left, and they did think they had a right to something. They had looked after him properly. Did I doubt that? Mr. Bennett would have been the first to say that they were speaking the bare truth. No one could have done more for him. He had never complained, and he had had nothing to complain of. And now, that Mr. P—— was for taking away every stick. A horrid bouncing fellow he was. And there was a small bill at the chemist's and another at the tobacconist's. Would I see that Mr. P—— paid them? The two Mrs. Greens were not going to meddle with it at all. And how they did hate that Mr. P——! A nasty roaring fellow, and didn't know how to speak properly to ladies. And he wanted to make off with everything.

I was about to go when the lesser Mrs. Green rose quickly and said, with a note of pride in her voice, "You'd like to see 'im. Mr. Bennett's upstairs in 'is room; and 'e does look nice with 'is 'air all combed proper and straight. You mustn't go without you've seen 'im. 'E's in his room,—this way." I saw that if I excused myself I should leave an impression that the Bhikkhu's friends did not honour him. I followed the crone up the narrow stairs, uneasily approaching the very presence of death.

She opened the bedroom door. I was aware of a faint aromatic fragrance: and looking round the room I noticed that it was quite unchanged except that an undulated sheet covered the bed. The crone turned back the top of the sheet, not with any awe but certainly with respect, and I saw the dark-haired head of my friend, slightly back-tilted

on the pillow, and the long hands folded upon the breast. "He is not there at all," I felt. "How queer! He is simply not there." The figure, in its repose and dignity, looked like a waxen effigy: and to name that inert form "Alan Bennett" would have seemed to me as fantastic as to plant a waxen flower. "Not there," went on the refrain in my heart—"the man whom I knew is not there." The old woman stood by, and said nothing. How strange it was that any one should ever have supposed that death is extinction. I had honoured him, I had loved him, and the personality that I had associated with this form was manifestly as far away from me as if he had gone back to Burma, as if I were looking at a book or a walking-stick which he had done with and had left behind. From earliest adolescence I had pondered about death. Now I was confronting the actuality. Now I had felt that infrangible silence and seen that mysterious immobility. Could I deceive myself, put myself off with fancies, refuse to admit a fact, in such a moment? As well might a man, in the midst of loving, declare that love is a myth, as I reject the overwhelming sense that there was no connection between the extinct form at which I was gazing and the mind that had so often signalled to me through the brown eyes that were now closed. I had looked upon death, and after all I had seen nothing of any importance. Where he was, what he had become, what experiences were befalling him, I could not imagine, and on this side of death should never truly know: but those few minutes had impressed me as profoundly as any through which I had lived, for I had wondered if all my old dreams and imaginations concerning

the soul might disperse and collapse, like a child's over-blown balloon, when I put them to so dread a test, and, on the contrary, I felt that, once and for ever, I had exposed the insignificance of an event that has overshadowed the minds of men from the dawn of the world. "And the dead of all the incalculable centuries," I mused, "—they also can never have really perished. They too, like Bennett, must have moved into new conditions, leaving cold images to the gentle ministration of those that were still alive."

The old woman sighed. "He was a good man," she said. Then she drew the sheet over the lifeless face, and we went down the stairs, and for the last time I shut the iron gate of the little villa, and walked, amidst the moving forms of men and women, to the junction at which I should find my bus.